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ABSTRACT

Marsick and Watkins, leaders in research on informal learning in the workplace, suggest that this type of learning is a process that occurs in everyday experience and place it in a category that includes incidental learning. It may occur in institutions, but is not typically classroom-based or highly structured. It is unique to the individual, and control rests primarily in the learner's hands. Two studies offer compelling support for adoption and implementation of strategies aimed at facilitating informal learning in the workplace. The Education Development Center study suggests that trainers can specify the learning process of employees through four taxonomies condensed by content and then broken down to include content of learning, types of activities, and occasions of learning. The United Kingdom's Department for Education and Employment study offers support for implementing strategies for facilitating informal learning in the workplace and identifies conducive environmental factors and components. The literature shows the importance of the workplace environment and its role in supporting informal learning. The environment should foster curiosity; remove barriers to learning; permit humility; and provide rewards for learning in order to purposefully create conditions that increase the probability that work-related informal learning will occur. Two strategies that facilitate informal learning in the workplace are mentoring and career development and planning. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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Informal Learning in the Workplace: A Brief Review of Practice and Application

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In an era of ongoing change, workplace learning has taken on an increasingly popular role as a vehicle by/through which organizations can achieve not only their short-term goals, but also their long-term, strategic visions. Under this umbrella term of workplace learning, organizations can categorize their efforts as either formal or informal; the focus of this paper is those that are categorized as informal. Although readers may have an intuitively clear picture of what informal learning may be, it is in fact a complex subject area. In this paper, I will explore the meaning of the term informal learning, as described by authors Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins. With the assistance of two studies that investigate the application and practical use of informal learning, I will review compelling support for informal learning in the workplace. From these studies, and others, environmental factors and components that are conducive to informal learning in the workplace will be explored. Finally, I will explore strategies for facilitating informal learning in the workplace.

The term *informal learning* was first introduced in 1950 by Malcolm Knowles, in his pioneer work entitled **Informal Adult Education** (Cseh, Marsick, Watkins 1999). Since that time, many authors have written about informal learning, offering their unique perspective on the meaning of the term. However, for the purposes of this paper, our focus is on informal learning in the workplace, and for over a decade now Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins have led the charge in this area of research. Rusaw (1995), referencing Marsick and Watkins, suggests that informal learning "...is a process of learning that takes place in everyday experience, often at subconscious levels." Marsick and Watkins (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997) have placed informal learning in a category that includes incidental learning, and add that it may occur in institutions, but is not typically classroom-based or highly structured. Marsick and Watkins add that, not only is informal learning unique to the individual, but control of learning, rests primarily in the hands of the learner (Marsick & Watkins, 1997). Earlier it was mentioned that Marsick and Watkins have placed informal and incidental learning in the same category. In his work entitled **Informal Learning in the Workplace**, Garrick (1998) points out that although Marsick and Watkins have placed informal and incidental learning in the same category, "A key distinguishing feature in Marsick and Watkins' definition is...that informal learning is intentional, incidental learning is not."

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It is important to note that the research supports introducing informal learning not as a replacement for formal activities but as a complement to them. In his article entitled *Informal Learning in Organizations,* Bell (1977) uses a metaphor of brick and mortar to describe the relationship between formal and informal learning in an organization. He explains that formal learning acts as bricks fused into the emerging bridge of personal growth (Bell, 1977). Informal learning, he adds, serves as the mortar, facilitating the acceptance and development of formal learning, adding that it is this synergy which produces effective growth (Bell, 1977). In support of the earlier notion that informal learning should not replace formal learning activities, it was found that the two elements support one another (Bell & Dale, 1999). In addition, research has found that reliance on informal learning alone has some drawbacks including difficulty in accrediting or using for formal qualifications, and informal learning "...may be too narrowly based so the employee only learns part of a task or superficial skills which may not be transferable." (Bell & Dale, 1999).

Benefits of Informal Learning

Why should attempts be made to facilitate informal learning in the workplace? What benefits are there to be gained, and why is informal learning a better choice than alternative interventions? My research identified two studies offering compelling support for adoption and implementation of strategies aimed at facilitating informal learning in the workplace. The first study, conducted in the mid-1990's by a nonprofit organization affiliated with the Education Development Center (EDC) in Newton, Massachusetts, sought to investigate informal learning within seven different companies operating in seven different states (Day, 1998). Funded by the Department of Labor, local state governments, and the Pew Charitable Trusts, the study included the following companies: Boeing Commercial Airplane Group, Siemens Power Transmission and Distribution, LLC, Reflexite North America, Data Instruments, Merry Mechanization, Inc., Ford Electronics, and Motorola (Day, 1998).

The EDC study suggests that "...trainers can specify the learning process of employees through a concept called *taxonomies*...," a matrix representing how and what employees learn, "...and what contextual and direct factors effect informal learning." (Day, 1998). The four taxonomies of learning were condensed by content (e.g. Practical Skills, Intrapersonal Skills, Interpersonal Skills, and Cultural Awareness), and then broken down further to include content of learning, types of activities, and occasions of learning. Figure 1.1 depicts the content area of Interpersonal Skills.

Figure 1.1

Interpersonal Skills

Content of Learning:	Interactive skills, such as peer-to-peer or subordinate-to-superior communications; formal presentation skills; teamwork dynamics; conflict resolution.
Types of Activities:	On-the-job training, customer interaction, meetings, teaming, mentoring.
Occasions for Learning:	Collective work on production goals, instructing others, receiving/giving feedback and advice.

Source: Center for Workforce Development in Newton, Massachusetts (Day, 1998).

In addition to the statement that 70% of learning takes place informally, the following merits of informal learning are also worthy of consideration (Day, 1998). Informal learning is need-specific, and is therefore highly relevant to the individual. Also, formal learning tends to be delayed, while what is learned informally tends to be used immediately.

In the other study, the United Kingdom's Department for Education and Employment (D*f*EE), sought to explore informal learning in the workplace and investigate how it can contribute to the success of companies (especially those classified as small and medium sized enterprises) and enhance the employability of employees (Bell & Dale, 1999),. The D*f*EE utilized the following, "...Companies regarded as being leading edge in the training and development of their employees took part in interviews and case studies and employees drawn from different types and size of company participated in group discussions." (Bell & Dale, 1999).

The key findings of the study offered support for implementing strategies for facilitating informal learning in the workplace and identified several environmental factors and components that were conducive to informal learning in the workplace. In addition, the study found that "Informal learning results in the development of skills and knowledge, enhances employability and produces positive benefits for managers and companies" (Bell & Dale, 1999). Also, employees are more flexible, becoming more employable, and learning can be adapted to the needs and situation of the company and/or individuals (Bell & Dale, 1999).

Workplace Environment

Throughout the literature, the importance of workplace environment and its role in supporting successful informal learning is quite evident. In collaboration with Cseh, Marsick & Watkins re-conceptualize their model of informal and incidental learning in a paper published in the 1999 Academy of Human Resource Development Conference proceedings. The work of co-author Maria Cseh, and her study of the learning of owner-managers of small, successful Romanian companies working in a volatile environment (Cseh et al, 1999) served as the rationale for this re-conceptualization. Cseh's study revealed that the lenses through which the managers saw their world framed their critical incidents and learning experiences (Cseh et al, 1999). "The context was sometimes interpreted as a macro trigger of critical incidents, as a barrier in finding solutions to their problem, or sometimes as offering potential opportunities." (Cseh et al, 1999). Recognizing that their model did not depict the pervasive influence that context had on each phase of the learning process, Marsick and Watkins re-conceptualized their model (Cseh et al, 1999). Changes included (but were not limited to) embedding the entire model in the context, and re-labeling Problem Framing as Frame the Context. Marsick and Watkins acknowledge the possibility that the context of Cseh's study was unique and may not warrant re-conceptualizing their model. However, they point out that the extremity of her examples made more visible the changes needed in their model (Cseh et al, 1999).

As the aforementioned reveals, the workplace environment cannot be discounted as an important component in the success of informal learning interventions. However, what types of environmental factors and components are conducive to informal learning in the workplace? In his paper entitled *Curiosity: Its Role and Implication in Informal Workplace Learning*, Thomas Reio (1997) suggests the importance of a workplace environment that fosters curiosity. Results

of a study conducted by Reio found that "Newcomers need and use curiosity to help them learn their interpersonal and technical requirements of their job." (Reio, 1997). In addition, Reio found that "An individual's curiosity or desire for information and knowledge motivates and directs information-seeking activities such as asking questions, observing, thinking, reflecting, reading, writing, and learning by trial and error to alleviate their sense of uncertainty about how to perform their jobs and how to define exactly their respective roles in their organizations." (Reio, 1997).

In addition to the importance of an environment that fosters curiosity, Bell (1977) suggests a diagnosis of the organizational setting to reveal existing informal learning opportunities. Once completed, he adds that punishing barriers to learning be removed, humility be permitted, rewarding consequences for learning be provided, conditions that increase the probability that work-related informal learning will occur be purposefully created (Bell, 1977).

Strategies for Facilitating Informal Learning in the Workplace

Although the literature offers many strategies for facilitating informal learning in the workplace, there are several worth highlighting. This unexhausted listing reflects a compilation of various authors' thoughts and perspectives on achieving success when facilitating informal learning in the workplace. I have selected two strategies to explore in greater detail: Mentoring and Career Development & Planning.

Mentoring

In her article entitled *Spiritual Dimensions of Informal Learning*, Leona English (2000) defines mentoring as "...the personal and professional assistance that one adult (the mentor) provides to another, less experienced adult (the mentee). Mentorship is the interpersonal relationship that occurs between two individuals that provides the potential for them to "be and to become." In **Learning in the Workplace**, edited by Victoria Marsick (1987), Lester is quoted as describing mentoring as a basic form of education for human development because it provides a holistic, yet individualized approach to learning. Support for the use of mentoring is offered by English (2000) as she introduces a beneficial outcome of these types of relationships; the ability to foster authentic spiritual development. Pointing to the example of the Antigonish movement of eastern Nova Scotia, English explains that mentoring and mentorship have the ability to foster: a strong sense of self; care, concern, and outreach to others; and the continuous construction of meaning and knowledge (English, 2000).

Convinced that mentoring is worth implementing? Here are some recommended strategies for facilitating the development of mentoring relationships in the workplace. Potential proteges should make public their goals, and let people know that they are interested in getting ahead (Bova, 1987). In addition, they should be aware of and seek advice from those persons that possess the knowledge and skills, they wish or need to acquire (Bova, 1987). Potential mentors need to be willing to share information, and view their jobs as that of training and development (Bova, 1987). For organizations, remember to trust the mentor's judgement, and encourage mentees' career development both inside and outside the organization.

Career Development & Planning

Referencing the work of Mumford, Marsick and Watkins (1997) encourage the use of personal development plans. These plans are developed in concert between managers, their managers and/or staff, and an external learning facilitator. These plans emphasize natural learning, void of the classroom, along with more structured courses or activities. Marsick and Watkins (1997) point out that informal learning can be planned, and overall learning is enhanced by planning, either before the fact, or looking back in retrospect to learn from past experience. This notion of planning is echoed by Bell (1977) when he referenced the opportunity for cross-unit sharing. By conducting an hour and a half session first thing in the morning, one organization brought together employees from two separate units to learn more about each other. Coffee and donuts were served, and each group was given one half hour to present, leaving another 30 minutes for a 'cocktail-party'-style discussion and networking (Bell, 1977). Bell also suggests reading and study groups as means for facilitating informal learning in the workplace. Brown bag discussions and book clubs serve as wonderful opportunities for informal learning, but they require planning. Employer's can support these initiatives by providing meeting space, resources to purchase the books, and even food, if the discussions are held during the employees' lunch-hour.

Another theme echoed by Bell, is taking advantage of the career development process, to build in planned opportunities for informal learning on behalf of the employee. This may include serving as a tutor for a trainee, taking responsibility for a staff meeting, or designing training as a member of a training steering committee (Bell, 1977). Learning opportunities that extend beyond the barriers of an employee's job description may offer exposure to knowledge, skills, and abilities required for future assignments, and/or opportunity for promotion. In addition, managers and supervisors should encourage their employees to become members of professional associations relevant to their current job or future aspirations. In her article entitled *Learning by Association: Professional Associations as Learning Agents,* A. Carol Rusaw (1995) speaks to the opportunities for informal learning inherent to membership in professional associations. Professional associations serve as a wonderful place to identify a mentor, one of the strategies discussed previously. In addition, the opportunity to serve in a position of leadership (i.e. an Officer, Chairperson, or task force leader) allows members to gain a perspective on management processes and practices by doing (Rusaw, 1995).

Throughout all of the strategies discussed here, the role of the front-line supervisor and/or manager is crucial, serving not only as enforcer, but also as a role model to the subordinate's interest in learning (Bell, 1977). By virtue of their hierarchical placement within the organization, they shoulder the burden of serving as either a hindrance or a catalyst to workplace learning. The importance of modeling the desired behavior cannot be underestimated. It adds credibility to the process and confirms the organization's overall commitment to creating and maintaining an environment conducive to informal learning in the workplace.

Summary

As evidenced by the two research studies (Day, 1998; Bell & Dale, 1999), the formidable advantages of informal learning cannot be denied. But, this is not to suggest that every corporation rush off to implement strategies for facilitating informal learning. Informal learning is merely one intervention that with its known successes, may be the solution to what ails an organization. A combination of the right environment and mix of strategies (those discussed here and others) are a great foundation for an organization's workplace learning efforts.

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